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# A History of the Audiology Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln: 1920 to 2015

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**A History of the Audiology Program at the  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
1920 to 2015**

**T. Newell Decker, Ph.D.**

**Audiology Program Coordinator 1977-2011**

**And**

**Professor Emeritus**

## **Forward**

Programs for the hearing impaired have been in existence at the University of Nebraska for many years. However, there is no comprehensive history of these efforts. This work is an attempt to provide a complete picture of these programs and to detail the history and growth of the Audiology Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. When the author came to the University in 1977 audiology was already well established at the University as well as in the State. After joining the faculty, the author served in the capacity of Coordinator of the Audiology and Hearing Science Program from 1977 until his retirement in 2011 and so, is in a unique position to compile this history.

As well be seen, the audiology program at UNL has been under steady development since the very early years. In addition, its focus has grown from one of educating teachers about the causes and effects of hearing loss, to providing therapeutic programs for those who have speech and hearing disabilities and providing a four year, post-baccalaureate professional degree in the form of the Doctor of Audiology (Au.D.)

Audiology as a profession and course of study is an outgrowth of the profession of “speech correction” later called Speech Pathology or Speech-Language Pathology. Many of those who early on referred to themselves as “audiologists” were in fact trained in the speech pathology realm and saw a connection between hearing impairment and distorted speech and language. Thus, it is

completely appropriate to begin this historical account with those early “speech correctionists-audiologists”. It is also the case that the growth of the audiology program is closely tied to the development of the Barkley Memorial Center on East Campus. For that reason, some mention will be made of the conception and construction of the Barkley Center.

As previously stated, there is no central compendium of information about the development of audiology in Nebraska. The author is grateful to the Archives of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries, people with past ties to the program and who allowed themselves to be interviewed, and professional colleagues at Nebraska and elsewhere who had memories to share.

Errors of omission are solely those of the author.

## Historical Antecedents

### 1920 - 1940

Just when and where the beginnings of interest in studying and applying the principles of “speech correction” to the hearing impaired in Nebraska might have taken place is open to question. It does appear that one of the earliest programs (1920) took place in the Omaha Public Schools under the direction of Mrs. Sarah H. Barber. Others involved in that program were, Alice V. Liljegren, Ebba Jacobson and Merle Snyder. There are reports of a speech correction program in the Lincoln Public Schools as early as 1927. That program resided at Lincoln High School and was headed by John B. Hanson. In the summer of 1920, a course in the *Measurement of Intelligence* was first offered at UNL. In 1922-1923, new course offerings included *The Retarded* and *The Feebleminded*. In 1925-1926 these courses were replaced with *The Exceptional Child* and *The Gifted*. As early as 1926, the UNL Department of Kindergarten and Elementary Education had a course in Speech Development and Correction. Graduate level courses in *Speech Pathology* and *Advanced Speech Pathology* were introduced in the Department of Educational Psychology and Measurements in 1933-1934. Programs offering graduate credit courses in speech pathology were offered beginning in the 1930’s at the University of Nebraska, Kearney State Teachers College, and Hastings College. Dr. LeRoy T.

Lasse, the faculty member most responsible for the advent of formal programs in communication disorders on the UNL campus moved from Hastings College to UNL in 1940.

### **1940 - 1969**

Dr. Leroy T. “Doc” Lasse was born in Wisner, Nebraska on July 6, 1905. He received his bachelor’s degree in 1927 from Doane College in Crete, Nebraska. His master’s degree came in 1929 from Northwestern and his Ph.D. from the University of Iowa in 1937. Before joining the UNL faculty in 1940, Dr. Lasse was Professor of Speech and Chairman of the Speech Department at Hastings College in Hastings, Nebraska. At UNL he served as Assistant Professor and Acting Chairman of the Department of Speech from 1940-1942. He was Associate Professor and Chairman from 1942-1948 and Professor of Speech and Chairman from 1948 until 1968.

During his career Dr. Lasse pioneered efforts to direct the state’s attention to the need for speech correction and therapy services in the Nebraska Public Schools. He was responsible for establishing a speech and hearing laboratory/clinic at the University and the operation of a therapy program which served the dual purpose of training teachers who specialized in speech correction and aiding a limited number of children and adults who had speech and hearing difficulties. Dr. Lasse expanded the scope of the Department of Speech from a program of elocution only to a department involving several

courses of study in Speech Communication, Theater Arts and Speech and Hearing Disorders. Each of those programs was granted authority to deliver the Masters Degree in 1945.

In 1949 Dr. John H. Wiley joined the faculty and became the first director of the speech clinic after Dr. Lasse. Dr. Wiley was the first person employed in the speech therapy program that held a doctoral degree and thus could contribute to the graduate program. Under his direction the University operated a speech and hearing testing service for all entering students. Dr. Wiley served as Director until 1961 at which time he transferred to the Nebraska Psychiatric Institute, Medical College, Omaha. He served there until 1965 at which time he joined the faculty of the University of Michigan. Dr. Wiley was replaced at UNL by Dr. Ernest Burji who served as acting director of the clinic until 1962. In 1962 Dr. George Kurtzrock joined the faculty and became the clinic director and served in that capacity until 1964.

During the 60's several other faculty were added to the department including David Hamnett, Don Sherrill, Herb Arkebauer and Herbert Schleisser. Dr. Sherrill subsequently became the Director of Special Education for Lincoln Public Schools in 1968 and Dr. Arkebauer left UNL in 1973 to become Head of Mill Neck Manor School for the Deaf in New York. Dave Hamnett served in the capacity of supervisor for off-campus clinic programs until his retirement. Dr. Lasse also employed a full-time audiologist, Dr. Dwayne Carter from Southern

Illinois University. In addition, the department also had the teaching services of Dr. John Fritsch, an Otolaryngologist in Lincoln, Dr. John McGee, Audiologist in the Department of Pediatrics at the College of Medicine in Omaha, and audiologists Mr. Irvin Deshayes, and Mr. Paul Kenny.

Following the retirement of Dr. Lasse in 1968, Dr. Herb Schliesser was appointed Director of the Program in Speech Pathology and Audiology and Vice-Chair for the Division of Speech and Dramatic Arts and served in that capacity until 1973.

The Department was granted the authority to give doctoral degrees in November of 1967 and the first description of those Ph.D. courses and experiences was detailed in the Graduate Bulletin for 1969-70, issued in November of 1968. The first Ph.D. was granted to Emmett O'Leary in 1972.

During his career, Dr. Lasse was the leader of several important professional organizations including President of the Nebraska Speech and Hearing Association, President of the Central States Speech Association and a Member of the Administrative Council, Speech Association of America. He also was a member and national officer of forensic fraternities Delta Sigma Rho and Delta Sigma Rho-Tau Kappa Alpha. Dr. Lasse died on September 4, 1979 following a heart attack.



Before he died he was deeply involved in the acquisition of the new national specialty accreditation provided by the Council for Academic Accreditation in Audiology and Speech, Language Pathology of the American Speech and Hearing Association (ASHA). The U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare had announced that after January 1, 1970 it would no longer extend grant money to non-accredited programs. A part of that accreditation process depended upon a cadre of doctoral level faculty.

The second of the “founders” of the programs in speech pathology and audiology was Dr. Lucile Cypreansen. Dr. Cypreansen received her bachelor’s degree from UNL in 1932. Her M.A. also came from UNL in 1942. The title of her M.A. thesis was *The Voice in Relation to Auditory Discrimination*. That degree was obtained from the Department of Educational Psychology and Measurements. That Department was also the home to another key player in the development of services to the hearing handicapped. Dr. Marshall Hiskey was interested in methods for the assessment of learning aptitude in the hearing impaired population. The result of his work, the *Hiskey-Nebraska Test of Learning Aptitude (H-NTLA)* published in 1966 has been regarded by reviewers as one of the best instruments for assessing the learning abilities of hearing-impaired children. A notable student of Dr. Hiskey’s was Tom Osborne who earned an Ed.D. under his mentorship.

Dr. Cypreansen earned her Ph.D. from Syracuse University in 1952. The title of her dissertation was *An Investigation of the Breathing and Speech Coordination and the Speech Intelligibility of Normal Speaking Children and of Cerebral Palsied Children with Speech Defects.*

While she was a master's student at the University she assisted in establishing the Speech Clinic in 1940. Prior to that in 1937 she established a series of night classes for University students with speech disorders and began a summer clinic for young school age children. Between 1942 and 1945 she taught speech correction courses at Wartburg College, IA, Central Washington College at Ellensburg, and the Portland Oregon Public Schools. In 1945 she became a faculty member in the Department of Speech and Dramatic Arts and served as Supervisor in the Speech and Hearing Clinic. Illness with cancer forced her retirement in about 1962. Lucile died on Friday, April 24, 1964. In her years at UNL she helped over 1000 children and adults with speech and hearing disorders and assisted in the training of over 250 speech and hearing therapists. She was the author of numerous publications and presentations and principle author of the book *Speech Development: Improvement and Correction.*

One of the adults that Dr. Cypreansen worked with during her career was Mrs. Edna Barkley. Mrs. Barkley was hearing impaired and Dr. Cypreansen worked with her to improve her lip reading skills. Mrs. Barkley was from a well to do

banking family in Lincoln and their relationship would have profound and lasting effects upon the development of speech pathology and audiology at UNL and in the State.

### **1969 - 1971**

In 1969 Dr. George Mencher arrived at UNL and would remain until 1973. This 4-5 year span saw a great deal of development in the audiology program including the first students to study for the Ph.D. degree. By 1970 the program included three full-time and four part-time Ph.D. students. Dr. Mencher was keenly interested in the hearing screening of babies and young children. At that time hearing screening was done in a behavioral fashion, a signal was presented and the examiners looked for a behavioral response to the sound. Such responses as eye blinks, sucking cessation behavior, startle responses, etc were observed to see if they were time locked to the stimulus presentation. This approach was called Behavioral Observation Audiometry or BOA. As might be imagined such a procedure is fraught with all sorts of bias on the part of the observer. Maintaining calibration of the stimulus delivery system was also a confounding variable in this approach. In order to study these variables and how they influenced the outcome of behavioral hearing screening, Dr. Mencher, in conjunction with Mrs. Marion Downs of the University of Colorado and then graduate student Barbara McCullough of UNL obtained a grant from the Lancaster County chapter of the March of Dimes. The grant money paid for the necessary instruments that were to be used in the screening program and the

data storage and analysis. The screening was carried out at Bryan Hospital in Lincoln. A number of papers and presentations issued from that grant and placed Lincoln and Nebraska in a position as the first city and state in the nation to successfully do universal screening of all hospital births. During that same period of time investigators at the University of Washington were also studying ways to reduce the bias involved in behavioral testing. Their approach was to use operant conditioning of stimulus and subject response. They were having some success and Dr. Mencher instituted some of those techniques at UNL.

During the time that Dr. Mencher was at UNL the program was still being housed in the Temple Building. The audiology facility had one testing booth in the basement of Temple. Hearing aid adjustments, impedance audiometry (a very new technique) and pure tone and speech audiometry were carried on in that space. The instrumentation in the audiology section consisted of the sound treated room, a MAICO MA-24 audiometer and a Grason-Stadler 1701 audiometer, an American Electromedics impedance bridge, several portable audiometers and a Grason-Stadler Bekesy audiometer for doing automated hearing evaluations. They had also purchased some lighted, moving toy animals from the University of Washington group to use as visual reinforcers in hearing evaluation of very young children.

## **1971-1976**

In 1971 Chancellor D. B. Varner announced the intent of the William E. Barkley family to leave their estate (approximately 3 million dollars) to UNL. The will identified three areas to receive support. They were 1) speech impairment, 2) hearing impairment, and 3) the adult deaf. This gift was no doubt the outgrowth of the relationship that the Barkley's had with both Dr. Lasse and Dr. Cypreansen.

Later in the same year a committee was appointed by Interim Chancellor C. Peter McGrath to "develop and design a specific program for the use of the funds." The committee after some difficult discussions and deliberations recommended that the funds from the trust together with a significant portion of the annual gift be used to build the William E. Barkley Memorial Center. The trustees of the estate approved the Committee's recommendation.

Steve Cook served as the architect for the project and the planning committee consisted of Dr. Herbert Schliesser, Dr. Marshall Hiskey, Dr. Robert Stepp and Harley Schrader, Director of Physical Plant. Governor James J. Exon approved the plans for the construction of the 1.3 million facility in April of 1974 with construction of the 33,000 square foot building to begin in April 1975. The Barkley Center allowed the Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology, the Division of Special Education, and the federal projects associated with Media Applications for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing to be located in a single building. The dedication ceremony was held on September 24, 1976. At the dedication,

then Chancellor Dr. Roy A Young, wrote, *In years to come the Barkley Foundations' continued support of programs and services to the Barkley Center will assure the University of ongoing leadership in each of the areas served by the Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology, the Division of Special Education, and the Specialized Office for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.*

In the beginning the Division and later the Department of Special Education was from Teachers College and the Division of Speech Pathology and Audiology was from the College of Arts and Sciences. In 1973-74, Dr. Sheldon Stick served as Acting Director of the Speech and Hearing Clinic and also as Acting Vice-Chair of the Division. During that same period Dr. Schliesser was serving as interim director of the Barkley building project. During the period 1974-1976, Dr. Robert McGlone became the Director of the Barkley Center. It was during this time that the program in speech pathology and audiology became a separate department from the Department of Speech Communication. Dr. McGlone became the first Chair in 1976 but served only a short period of time. The position of Chair of the Department and Director of the Clinic was assumed by Dr. Sheldon Stick in 1976. He served in that capacity until 1983. When Dr. McGlone stepped down as Center Director, Dr. Robert Stepp became the Director of the Barkley Memorial Center and remained in that position until 1983. In 1978 the Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology was moved from the College of Arts and Sciences to Teachers College.

The Division of Special Education from within the Department of Educational Psychology continued to function in that administrative structure until 1978 when Special Education became the Department of Special Education under the leadership of Dr. Duane Alcorn.

At the time of the construction of the Barkley Memorial Center the audiology faculty consisted of one full-time master's level person, Irv Deshayes, one part-time master's person, Barb McColluch and one full time Ph.D., James Egan. The audiology section was situated on the first floor of the Center. There were two Industrial Acoustics Corporation (IAC) sound isolated rooms. Those two rooms were situated in a portion of the first floor that was actually underground in order to increase the shielding from noise. In addition the rooms were "floated" on springs to further isolate them from the outside environment. Indeed, the sound levels in the unoccupied rooms approached 20dBA. Each of the rooms was equipped with diagnostic audiometers and equipment for doing sound field testing. There was an American Electromedics Impedance Bridge and additional equipment (Bruel & Kjaer) for evaluating hearing aids.

### **1976 - 1984**

Dr. Egan left the audiology program in 1976 and in 1977 Dr. T. Newell Decker was hired to replace Dr. Egan. Dr. Decker was a graduate of the University of Washington (Ph.D., 1975) and while there, had been a member of the NIH funded team studying speech development in very young normal and hearing impaired children. The task of the Washington audiology group was to develop evaluation methods that were more accurate than the behavioral approach that had been used for so many previous years. In the years 1970-1975 the grant developed several operant conditioning procedures (Visual Reinforcement Audiometry (VRA) and Tangible Reinforcement Audiometry (TROCA). While at Washington, Dr. Decker had also developed an interest in a recently discovered evaluation technique called the Auditory Brainstem Response (ABR). This technique showed great promise in the evaluation of newborns and he brought this interest with him to UNL. The University provided him with a Nicolet 1072 Signal Averager with which to continue his work on the ABR.

As the only Ph.D. faculty member in the audiology section, Dr. Decker became the de facto Coordinator of the program. At the time of his arrival the masters program in audiology had 4 students, two of which he brought with him from his previous position at the University of North Dakota. From that time forward



for several years the audiology student population consisted of just 3 to 6 new students per year.

The large sound room that had served audiology in the Temple Building was slated for disposal but was discovered by Dr. Decker to be lying on the sidewalk outside of the building. A move of that sound room to the new Center was negotiated. It was installed in a large room on the first floor which subsequently became the research area for audiology. Not long after that another sound room was discovered in the basement of the Engineering building on City Campus. That too was moved to the same large room in the Center. Audiology now had quite a large space in which to conduct its research and training programs. Over time a large amount of research equipment devoted to electrophysiological and psychoacoustical research was acquired.

In 1983 a decision was made that the Departments of Speech Pathology and Audiology and Department of Special Education would be merged into a single Department of Special Education and Communication Disorders and housed in Teachers College. In addition a single individual would chair the newly formed Department and would also serve as Director of the Center. Previously there was a Director of the Center (Dr. Stepp) and each Department had a chair.

At about the time that the two departments were being combined (1983), Dr, Stepp retired as Director of the Barkley Center. It was determined that the new Director of the Center should also be the Chair of the combined departments that were to be called the Department of Special Education and Communication Disorders. The search for that person ended with the appointment of Dr. John E. Bernthal in 1984.

### **1985-1999**

One of the first items on Dr. Bernthal's agenda besides working on the structure and organization of the newly formed Department was a proposal for an addition to the Barkley Center. Following the approval of the design, construction followed and was completed in 1986. There was a formal dedication for the addition which included faculty and staff, Chancellor Massengale, members of the Board of Regents and guests. The addition to the East side of the building consisted of approximately 18,000 square feet of space and included a large auditorium like classroom with state of the art audiovisual equipment, a faculty and student lounge, three seminar rooms, a large preschool/multipurpose room with an observation room, an office/treatment room for the Scottish Rite Mason Language program, three office spaces and storage.

Under the administration of Dr. Bernthal the audiology section began to grow both in numbers of students as well as in its outreach to the community. It

became apparent that there was a need for a second Ph.D. level teaching faculty member. There was a primary need for someone to develop the aural rehabilitation side of the curriculum since Dr. Decker's expertise was in diagnostics and the application of the rather new area of Auditory Brainstem Audiometry. A search was conducted and Dr. Stephen Boney, a recent graduate of Vanderbilt University was hired in 1986. Dr. Boney assumed the responsibility for the aural rehabilitation courses, and the hearing aid clinic.

During that time the audiology research space was equipped with additional equipment to further the evoked potential research that was going on. This new equipment was modular in design allowing it to be configured in different ways for both faculty and student research projects. This new equipment helped gain several grants, one of which provided for the hiring of Mrs. Jody Spaulding as an assistant. Jody held a masters degree from the University of Iowa and post-masters experience with Dr. Charles I Berlin at the Kresge Hearing Research Lab of the South in New Orleans, LA. When the grant monies ran out Jody stayed on the faculty as a part-time audiologist delivering services to the public. An equally important member of the Barkley Center family was Mr. Robert Tice. Bob was hired to coordinate the ever growing technical needs of the programs in the BKC. Bob had been a math teacher and although he knew nothing of Fourier Transforms and signal averaging, in short order he had learned enough to develop badly needed software for the audiology labs. He was also instrumental in bringing the faculty of the entire Center into the

expanding world of personal computing and the Internet. Bob personally strung Ethernet cable throughout the Center by climbing up into the ceiling recesses of the three floors. In 2005 the audiology faculty was joined by Dr. Neil Shepard. Dr. Shepard carried with him considerable expertise in the area of vestibular disorders. Dr. Shepard remained on the faculty until 2007 when he left to join the audiology group at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN.

The Barkley Center underwent an additional expansion in 2003. This three floor expansion on the north end of the building provided for much needed office and lab space for the research.

The third expansion in 2010 provided for a total remodeling of the first floor and provided the audiology section with a totally reworked “home”. New faculty offices were constructed along the existing hallway and the area previously occupied by faculty offices was converted into two suites for hearing aid fitting and counseling. The original sound rooms remained in their original location but a separate room was constructed for the purposes of doing impedance, and admittance measurements. Additionally, a separate room was constructed for use in the evoked response testing of children below the age of approximately six months. A hearing aid repair and modification lab area was also constructed. In addition a large amount of space was converted into a suite for the study of balance disorders. This space was occupied by Dr. Julie Honaker who was hired in 2007 following her Ph.D. from the University of Cincinnati.

She spent two years in a post-doctoral program with Dr. Neil Shepard at the Mayo Clinic before joining the faculty in 2009. Equipment for vestibular testing that had been acquired during Dr. Shepard's time on the faculty and also from Boys Town National Hospital and which had been in storage for some time was moved into Dr. Honaker's space. That equipment consisted of Computerized Dynamic Posturography and a Rotary Chair.

The SERTOMA Hearing Aid bank begun as a collaborative project between the Nebraska Sertoma Clubs, UNL Barkley Center, and the Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NDCHH) had been in existence for quite some time. However, this "bank" was rejuvenated and modernized in about 1981. The bank provided hearing aid evaluation and fitting of free, reconditioned hearing aids to adults that could not afford them. In addition, the Barkley Center took over the management of the Lion's Hearing Aid Bank in 2012. This bank is also a collaborative effort between the Lions Club, the Barkley Center, and the NDCHH. These two hearing aid banks have been coordinated by Dr. Stacie Ray. Since 1999 these banks have distributed over 2000 hearing aids and served an average of 120 patients per year, dispensing approximately 160 hearing aids per year. Dr. Ray not only expanded the scope of the SERTOMA and Lions Hearing Aid banks but also created a similar hearing aid bank for pediatric patients. That pediatric bank is called HearU Nebraska. It began in 2008, under the name of the Nebraska Children's Hearing Aid Bank. It changed to HearU Nebraska in 2011 at which time a fund

was established through the NU Foundation. Funding for HearU comes from private donations and Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Early Hearing Detection and Identification program (EHDI). Since 2008 a total of 395 hearing aids have been dispensed to 233 children across Nebraska, ranging in age from 3 weeks to age 18. In the time period 2012-2014 the combined HearU, Lions and Sertoma banks served 500 individuals across the life span and dispensed 850 hearing aids.

The audiology clinic by now was generating approximately \$400,000 per year from patient fees. Clearly, the audiology clinical program had grown to maturity and the faculty realized a need for a clinic coordinator. Dr. Kelly Wacker Pritchitt was hired in 2007. In addition to coordinating on campus and off-campus clinics, Dr. Pritchitt is responsible for the placement of Au.D. students in externship sites across the Country.

In 1983 an ASHA study concluded that a two-year audiology master's degree was no longer sufficient time to adequately prepare students for clinical practice and nation-wide discussions began to form around the need for a professional doctorate that was to be the entry-level degree for the profession. In 1984 and again in 1986 an ASHA task force recommended that the professional doctorate be adopted for audiology. However, ASHA did not act on these recommendations. The movement, however, was gaining traction across the country and at the 1993 Annual Convention of ASHA in Anaheim California

the Legislative Council passed Resolution L.C. 44-93, supporting the professional doctorate (the Au.D. degree) as the entry level degree in audiology and recommended that the Standards Council change the degree requirements for the Certificate of Clinical Competence in Audiology from a master's degree to the professional doctorate. Standards Council subsequently mandated the change to occur by 2012. This, of course, meant that audiology programs across the country that wished to offer the new degree (four years of study) would need to have programs in place no later than 2008.

The audiology program at UNL began the new degree proposal process in 2000. Over the next four years the proposal was refined and included the participation of the faculty at the Boys Town National Hospital. The proposal went to the Board of Regents in 2002 and the Au.D. became a reality in the fall semester of 2004. Not wishing to abandon its commitment to the research degree the audiology section created a joint Au.D.-Ph.D. program that was approved in 2006.

## **2000 - 2015**

After 35 years as the Coordinator of the Audiology Program at UNL, Dr. Decker retired and Dr. Boney assumed those duties. Having grown from a 2.5 person, 4 student program to a program offering both the Au.D. and the Ph.D. with a faculty of more than 10 and a student population of close to 40, the audiology section of the Barkley Center is doing quite well in its mission to educate students and to meet the needs of the hearing impaired public. Over those 35

years the program trained more than 250 audiologists, many of whom have gone on to important academic and clinical positions across the United States and Canada.

### **Summary**

As the year 2015 draws to a close the Barkley Memorial Center gets set for the celebration of 40 years of service to the public and education of students in special education and communication disorders. It has been a remarkable journey from an idea in the mind of the Barkley family to a building housing nationally and internationally recognized programs and faculty serving children and adults with special needs in both education and communication disorders. The Barkley Foundation money has not only provided for the physical assets but has provided support for faculty in their pursuit of new knowledge related to special education and communication disorders. The original gift has been translated into an ever growing list of innovative research, teaching and service.